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Orson Welles: Beyond the Cannon and Into the Archive

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Orson Welles

Beyond the Canon and into the Archive

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Orson Welles

Beyond the Canon and into the Archive

For the Audubon Room section of this exhibit, the eleven students in the course Screen Arts & Cultures 330 Authorship and the Archive each chose artifacts from among the 100 boxes of Welles' papers held by the University of Michigan Library (Special Collections Library).

Not surprisingly, each student took a different approach to making their selection. Some students chose artifacts that further explored the themes in their work on the exhibit panels displayed in the Library Gallery: Welles' personal correspondence with his first wife Virginia Nicholson, his love and fascination for magic, and his struggle to fund the unproduced film *King Lear*. Other students chose items that uncover an aspect of Welles that is not explored in the panels, most notably a valentine Welles made for his second wife, actress Rita Hayworth.

This small but revealing sampling from the Welles collections can only hint at how much more there is yet to be discovered about one of the most talked and written about artists and personalities of the twentieth century.

The contact sheets reproduced in the exhibit-room poster and in the tall case are from the 1962 film *The Trial*, which Welles directed and starred in along with Anthony Perkins and Romy Schneider. It was during filming that Welles met Oja Kodar, who became his muse and mistress until his death in 1985.

Tall Case

George Orson Welles was born on May 6, 1915 in Kenosha, Wisconsin, to Beatrice Ives Welles, a pianist, and Richard Head Welles, a successful inventor. Although his family was well off, Welles' childhood was filled with hardship. His parents divorced in 1919, and his father became an alcoholic and stopped working. When Welles was just nine years old, his mother died of hepatitis in 1924, and Welles had to move in with and care for his father. The pair moved and traveled frequently, residing in a number of unusual places, including a hotel room in Grand Detour, Illinois.

On September 15, 1926, Welles enrolled in the Todd Seminary for Boys, a private school in Woodstock, Illinois. At Todd, Welles for once felt at

home and was able to explore his creativity. There Welles performed in and staged theatrical productions and hosted his first radio show. Welles also encountered Roger Hill, a teacher who would become an important mentor to Welles.

When Welles' father passed away on December 28, 1930, Welles asked Hill to become his guardian. Although Hill declined and Welles moved in with a family friend, Maurice Bernstein, Welles and Hill maintained a lifelong friendship and correspondence.

Welles graduated from the Todd School in May 1931. Although he was awarded a scholarship to Harvard University, Welles chose to travel instead. He spent several weeks studying painting at the Art Institute of Chicago before departing on a trip to Europe and soon thereafter launched his career.

- Photograph
n.d.
Orson Welles' mother, Beatrice Welles was a skilled pianist. Beatrice gave her son piano lessons as a boy, but he gave up music after his mother passed away. On the back of the photograph Welles wrote "Dear Christopher, You may like this picture of your Grandmother."
- Photograph
n.d.
Young Orson Welles and his dog, Caesar
- Photograph
February 1934
Electing to travel instead of attending college, here the nineteen-year-old Orson Welles stands outside La Louisiane Restaurant in New Orleans.
- Letter from Welles to Roger Hill
1982
Orson Welles first met Roger Hill in 1926 when he was a student at the Todd School. Hill was one of Welles' teachers and would become a lifelong mentor and friend. In this letter Welles reflects on his unhappy childhood upon learning about the death of Hill's mother, Hortense.
- Letter from Welles to his first wife, Virginia Nicolson
August 5, 1939
Like he did as a boy, Welles spent a great deal of his adult life traveling.

While on the road he kept a regular correspondence with Virginia. In this letter, Welles describes traveling with their eighteen-month-old daughter, Christopher, whose portrait Welles sketched in pencil.

Ava Burnham

- Film negative
[1939?]
This original film negative from the production of Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* shows him holding and looking at an unidentified object; it seems to be some kind of viewing devise. He is dressed in his costume for the film and has a pipe in his mouth. The film crew and equipment appear in the background.
- Production research
This was obtained for Orson Welles' 1948 film version of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. The print, cut from a book and adhered to a worn and torn black cardboard, was once in the collection of the Los Angeles Public Library. It depicts the Act 2, Scene II of the play. It has a "CITY [Los Angeles] PROPERTY" label on the back, and it is No. 47 in, presumably, a series of such scenes. We can only speculate as to the function of this piece for research, and the fact of its being out of the possession of the LAPL.
- Photograph and photographic collage
Movie star Rita Hayworth was the second wife of Orson Welles. This assemblage is undated and without signature, so, who made this collage? Was it Welles himself? Or was it a fan of Rita Hayworth? Perhaps it was in fact both. Welles was known to be a tremendous fan of Rita Hayworth before she became his wife. The mystery of the collage's creator notwithstanding, Rita Hayworth's beauty and Hollywood glamour shine through.
- Letter from Lewis R. Woodall Jr. to "Orsen Wells Productions"
August 20, 1949
Eight years after the release of *Citizen Kane* in 1941, Woodall wrote this

letter to “Orsen Wells Productions” in Hollywood, California. Despite the spelling mistakes, the letter is quite a testament to the greatness of *Citizen Kane*. Often you may read an essay or academic piece on the film, but this letter from a passionate fan in Virginia, hoping and writing for another chance to see the film, is a lovely and novel view of the film’s impact on the world. It is certainly a unique perspective; a Virginian man longing to see a film at a time when he simply could not put a disc in a machine, a process we so often take for granted.

Luke Collard

- Passport
1968–1976
This passport belonging to Welles acquired upwards of 200 stamps, verifying his exit and entrance into countries including the United Kingdom, Spain, Romania, Germany, Switzerland, Yugoslavia, and France.
- Photographs of Welles at Todd
Welles studied at the Todd Seminary for Boys in Woodstock, Illinois, from 1926–1930. It was there that Welles nurtured his love for the theater under the guidance of his teacher and mentor, Roger Hill. Because Welles moved often as a child and his family never settled down, he considered Woodstock his hometown.
 - Todd school library informal group shot
 - Welles (center) with friends at a birthday picnic; May 25, 1931
- Barbara Leaming
“Orson Welles: The Unfulfilled Promise”
The New York Times Magazine
July 14, 1985
This article relays the life and history of Welles. It tells the story of a young genius burdened by the fact that he reached the peak of his career at an early age, and the ensuing years of decline and disappointment. The cover image is often the one associated with the legend of Orson Welles.

- Invitation

June 21, 1976

President and Mrs. Ford invited “Mr. and Mrs. Orson Welles” to dinner on the occasion of the visit of Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip. Welles was very politically active. He campaigned and was an avid supporter of Franklin Roosevelt, was a frequent guest to the White House, and was often encouraged to run for political office. It appears that Welles did not attend this gala event.

Kaley Wetekamp

- Confirmation of Ownership Rights to Oja Kodar, annotated

June 19, 1985

On this date, Orson Welles signed this document, based on a verbal agreement, giving Oja Kodar ownership rights to every film project that she worked on with Welles. Interestingly, there was a dispute between Oja Kodar and Welles’ daughter Beatrice over ownership rights of *The Other Side of the Wind*.

- Drawing of set for the 1965 film, *Chimes at Midnight*

Sketch showing the position of the camera mounted to a crane.

- Christmas card

December 23, 1937

This “self-portrait,” drawn by Virginia, shows her pregnant with Christopher, their daughter, Welles, and their cocker spaniel, Budget.

- Photograph

signed; n.d.

Maiya Lindsey

In this correspondence from Orson Welles to his first wife, Virginia Nicolson, you can see the hardships in their marriage. Although Welles emphasizes how much he loves her, he also is constantly apologizing. It is known that while they were married, Welles had multiple affairs.

In his letter from August 15, 1939, Welles tells Virginia to give love to family friends, two of whom were more to Welles. Welles had an affair with the mentioned actress Geraldine Fitzgerald, and Michael is actually their son.

These letters show that Welles had a large heart, while also revealing his faults.

- Telegram from Orson to Virginia
March 16, 1937
sent from The Netherlands
- Telegram from Orson to Virginia (facsimile)
March 26, 1937
sent from The Netherlands
- Telegram from Orson to Virginia (facsimile)
March 23, [1939?]
sent from Philadelphia
- Letter from Orson to Virginia
August 15, 1939

Anjelica Lyman

Short Case

Orson Welles was a true visionary in the entertainment industry. He did many of the set sketches for his films personally such as for the Florida estate in the movie *Citizen Kane*. Welles was continuously busy with simultaneous projects, but he was able to do so many throughout his career because he edited many of his films on different production locations by just sending directions or instructions in telegrams or letters.

Most of the scenes that were shortened or altered in the movie *The Magnificent Ambersons* after the March 17, 1942 preview were done according to directions sent in telegrams by Welles to his editor Jack Moss.

He also sent letters to actors and musicians to share his vision for projects and convince them to become part of the cast. Before the production of *It's All True*, Welles wrote to Louis Armstrong assuring him of the success they would have and explained how he wanted to show African-Americans being solely responsible for the creation and development of jazz music.

Even though many of the original scripts from Welles' productions are annotated, the script fragment from the film *The Stranger* shows his imaginative thinking process about a particular scene.

- Orson Welles
Photographs of sketches of sets for *Citizen Kane*
ca. 1940
- Letter from Welles to Louis Armstrong
September 21, 1941
- Telegram from Welles to Jack Moss
April 18, 1942
- Annotated script fragment from the film *The Stranger*
ca. 1946

Han Joon Kim

-
- Contract between Louis Armstrong and Orson Welles
October 2, 1941
This contract engaged Armstrong to be a part of Welles' film *It's All True*. In the contract, it is stated that Armstrong will "receive top billing of any colored artist and/or colored musician in the picture and top billing of anyone of the "jazz sequence" of the picture."
 - Letter from a minister to Welles
November 2, 1938
A minister (W.C. Barr?) of the First Baptist Church in Meridian, Mississippi, sent this letter to Welles "to thank [him] for this contribution to the interest of religion" because people who had listened to the War of

the Worlds radio broadcast came into church to confess their sins to God in the hope of forgiveness before the world ended.

- Script fragment with hand-written annotations
[1936]
This is a fragment of the original script of Welles' very successful theater production *Macbeth*, also known as *Voodoo Macbeth*.
- Photograph
1940
This was taken on the set of *Citizen Kane* where Welles is sketching, showing how broad his artistic talents were. Here, it appears that he is painting the older version of Kane.

Hannah Noel

-
- Radio Script
April 13, 1945
Orson Welles and Franklin D. Roosevelt were close friends, and this is the script of the radio memorial that Welles gave after Roosevelt's death on April 12th. He expresses his deep respect and admiration for his late friend and the emptiness he feels now that he is gone.
 - Letter from Branson Price, Southern Conference for Human Welfare, to Dick Wilson
July 2, 1946
The Southern Conference for Human Welfare was active in fighting racial prejudice in the South during the late 1930s through the mid-1940s. In this letter, they are writing to Dick Wilson asking him to persuade Welles to be the co-chair of their conference with Joe Louis because Welles was a known progressive political activist at this time.
 - Record
"Great American Documents"
1976
Welles and other famous entertainment personalities read from four Great American Documents on this vinyl record. Welles reads the

“Declaration of Independence” and the original seven Articles from the United States “Constitution.” Because he was someone who started out in radio and the theater, Welles was known and loved for his powerful booming voice, and throughout his career, he was hired to read several important documents.

- Letter from Welles to Bob Meltzer

July 9, 1942

In this carbon copy of a letter, Welles writes from Brazil to his friend and colleague Bob Meltzer, who is in Los Angeles, about the wonderful time he is having filming *It's All True* in Brazil. He explains that he wants to return to South and Central America and make a film about the greatest cities in the world. While Welles was in Rio de Janeiro, he was politically active promoting Pan-American cooperation and was loved by the people there for making a true effort to learn their language and culture and properly represent it in his film to North American audiences.

Natalie Grove

- Letter from Orson Welles to Mr. Webb

between 1975 and 1985

Welles maintained a regular correspondence with his many magician friends while he was away from Los Angeles on business. These letters contained friendly conversation, the sharing of new tricks, or in this case, book recommendations. These messages from his magician friends seem to be among a select few of non-professional letters to which Welles ever took time to respond.

- Annotated script for a magic performance

between 1975 and 1985

Welles was, above anything else, a showman. All of his tricks were meticulously planned and contained an aura of exotic intrigue. Here is an example of a draft for a new trick. He often used references to cultures with ancient mysterious connotations, such as the Pharaohs of Egypt, and in this case, a coin from the “Royal Treasury of Lhasa.”

- Rental agreement with Chuck Jones

August 7, 1982

For his larger, more complicated performances, Welles often rented equipment and tricks from magic-supply companies. Although he preferred to do original tricks, sometimes larger ones with more contraptions made for better television. Despite using borrowed equipment, the scripts, presentation, and magical aura were purely Welles.

- Magic books

Five books about tricks—card and mental magic—found among the artifacts in the Archive.

Nick Sheehan

While Orson Welles is perhaps best known for the enduring success of his classic film *Citizen Kane*, his life and career were often plagued with frustration and setbacks. During his career, Welles worked on many uncompleted films such as *It's All True*. Many of the uncompleted films were the result of disputes between Welles and film studios. Studio executives often expressed a distrust in Welles' filmmaking ability as his films were often expensive to produce and were not immediate commercial successes. For example, filming of *It's All True* was stopped in 1942 when the film studio RKO cut funding. In spite of the financial issues and turmoil surrounding his career, Orson Welles remained determined to make films, as well as return to his roots in the theater. *Around the World* was a Welles theater production that premiered in 1946. The musical production had a very limited run due to its large cast and expensive sets. In spite of the setbacks and obstacles he experienced, Orson Welles will forever be remembered for his contribution to radio, theater, television, and film.

- Photograph

1942

Orson Welles in Brazil during the filming of *It's All True*

- Photograph

1946

Orson Welles on stage in *Around the World*, one of his most extravagant stage productions. Due to *Around the World's* expensive nature, it had a very limited run.

- Letter between Welles and Johnny Hyde
1946

Carbon copy of a letter (or a draft of a letter) between Welles and a talent agent, Johnny Hyde, regarding the film, *The Stranger*. In previous letters, Hyde had told Welles that studios did not want Welles to both act and direct films. In this letter, Welles expresses his anger toward the studio's distrust of his filmmaking ability.

- Travel visa

August 11, 1942

This travel visa was granted to Welles from Ecuador. Welles was granted the visa after funding was cut to *It's All True*. This document was used by Welles as he left Brazil to return to the U.S.A.

Austin Dumm

King Lear was a project led by Orson Welles and his partner Alessandro Tasca di Cuto. Unfortunately it was never finished because they could not come up with the money. It was intended that Welles would direct and star in the film as Lear, but his unexpected death on October 10, 1985 ended any hope of completing the picture. Welles intended for the film to be shot intimately, in black and white, and with his longtime girlfriend Oja Kodar in the role of Cordelia. Welles considered *King Lear* to be Shakespeare's masterpiece. Welles wanted his film to be the anti-spectacle of the year; he wanted it to be real and humanizing.

On May 1984, a preliminary budget showed that the direct costs for the film was \$2,981,000. In the following summer, costs rose slightly to \$3,018,010 to provide higher pay for the cast and crew members, and to accommodate increased living expenses. In August 1985, Tasca was signed on as producer with the final budget for the film to be no less than \$4,919,322. Arrangements were made for *Lear* to be funded with the support of French overseas investors, who then went back on their promises and pulled out of the deal.

- Script for *King Lear*
September 20, 1985
(facsimile of the title page)
- Budget, preliminary
May 1984
- Production Budget
July 21, 1985
- Picture Budget Detail (final budget)
August 1985

Joseph Pecoraro

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